Holiness and Sexual Purity

The NT writers emphasize the importance of holy living in the area of sexual relations. In contrast to the so-called sexual freedom of the Greco-Roman world, the sexual life of God’s people is to be characterized by faithfulness and purity (1 Thes 4:3-8). Sexual relationships are to be restricted to marriage alone (1 Cor 7:1-9, 36-37; see also “Human Sexuality” at Gen 1:27-28).

God has made Christians holy by the work of his Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:11; 2 Thes 2:13), and they are therefore called to live as his own holy people (1 Cor 1:2). God has given them everything they need to live a holy life in this world (2 Pet 1:3-4). As a result, their way of life is to be distinctly different from that of the unholy world around them. Every part of their life is to reflect the transforming work of the Holy Spirit (Rom 12:2). It is therefore inappropriate for anyone who is united to Christ to have sexual relations with anyone outside of marriage. Such relations violate the Christian’s body, which has become a sanctuary of the living God and is therefore claimed by God for himself (1 Cor 6:12-20).

Though homosexual activity was accepted in Greco-Roman culture, it is condemned throughout the Bible. In both the OT and the NT, homosexual activity is viewed as a perversion of God’s intentions for men and women (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 1 Tim 1:10).

Those who freely give themselves to illicit sexual relations, whether homosexual or heterosexual, will not inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:19-21; Col 3:5-6), but will suffer God’s judgment (see 2 Pet 2:1-3:13). As with all sin, though, forgiveness and cleansing are available for those who turn to Christ with faith and repentance (Acts 2:38; Rom 3:21-26). In every way, God’s people are to live in holiness and godliness (2 Pet 3:11), in accord with the desires of their Creator and Judge.

Biblical Marriage

At the first wedding, God the Father gave the bride away to the groom and witnessed the couple’s interaction in his sanctuary-garden (2:18-25). Married love is thus a binding covenant commitment before God. Breaching that covenant (e.g., through adultery) is a crime against persons and against God, who is a divine witness to and guarantor of the marriage covenant (see Mal 2:10-16; cp. Gen 39:6-9; Jer 3:1; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Heb 13:4). Although marriage is exclusive, it is not private. It is legally declared in public, with community recognition, witnesses, and accountability (see Lev 20:10-12; Deut 22:22; Jer 29:20-23).

Marriage is also a metaphor of the Lord’s relationship with his people, first with Israel (see Exod 19:3-6; 20:2-6; 34:14; Isa 54:5; Ezek 16:1-63; Hos 2:19-20), and then with the church (see 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:21-33). A marriage points to something greater than itself—God’s people (Christ’s “bride”) await the return of Christ (the “groom”). Married Christians are called to live in unity and dignity as they anticipate the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:6-9). Christ will live forever with his faithful people in glory (Rev 19:7; 21:2, 9).
The Broken Covenant

A central issue in the Lord’s relationship with the Israelite people was whether the covenant made at Sinai (see Exod 20:1–24:11), which the people of Israel had broken, was still valid. In the politics of the ancient Near East, covenant agreements were common. When one of the partners in a covenant broke the terms of the agreement, the result was usually war.

The Sinai Covenant was unique because the Lord was one of the covenant partners. Patterned after secular covenants, the covenant required the Lord and Israel to seal the covenant with solemn oaths of faithfulness (Exod 24:1-11; Deut 29–30; Josh 8:30-35; 24:1-28). The Lord always remained faithful to his covenant commitment, but the Israelite people repeatedly broke the covenant as Canaanite polytheism lured them away from the Lord. They broke the laws banning the worship of idols, engaged in immoral sex rituals, and ignored God’s requirements for righteousness.

For centuries, the Israelites swung back and forth between worship of the Lord God and worship of Baal. Whenever they repented and returned to the Lord, he mercifully took them back into the covenant relationship. However, by the mid-700s BC, the Israelites of the northern kingdom of Israel had become so determined in their idol worship that the Lord let the Assyrians destroy the kingdom and take many people into captivity.

At the time of Jeremiah’s ministry, over 100 years later, Judah was headed down the same road. In Jer 2–3, Jeremiah likened this tragedy to the break-up of a marriage relationship, much as Hosea had pictured it earlier for Israel (Hos 1–2). Israel’s bond with the Lord is portrayed as a marriage in which the bride forsook her husband and took up with other lovers. The Lord charged Israel with violating the marriage bond by being a prostitute (3:1), and he warned the nation to return to the Lord or face destruction. The Lord was also like a father whose relationship with his son had been broken because the son had turned his back on him. God could no longer say of the Israelites, “I will be their God, and they will be my people” (31:33; see also Exod 6:7; Hos 1:9).

Just as breaking the covenant had cost the northern kingdom its existence, so it later destroyed the southern kingdom of Judah. Jerusalem was torn apart, and the Temple was destroyed. This punishment cut deeply and painfully into God’s heart. The ever-merciful Lord promised a new covenant to replace the broken Sinai Covenant (31:31-34).

Marriage and Divorce

God had warned his people not to intermarry with unbelieving foreigners (Deut 7:1-6). The sin was not that they married people from another country or race but that they married people committed to another religion. Moses had married a Cushite woman (Num 12:1), and other foreigners had joined Israel through marriage, notably Rahab the Canaanite (Josh 2:6; Heb 11:31) and Ruth the Moabite (Ruth 4). These women embraced faith in the Lord, and they were blessed. On the other hand, Solomon had taken many foreign wives, and their devotion to other religions led him into idolatry, just as the Lord had warned (1 Kgs 11:1-5).
The marriage covenant is sacred, but it was even more important for Israel to remain faithful to the Lord’s covenant with them as a people. Mixed marriages would produce children who were not fully committed to Israel’s faith, having been influenced by their mothers’ idolatrous beliefs. This compromise would lead Israel right back to where they were before the Exile—to wholesale unfaithfulness to God and wholehearted embracing of false religions (see Judg 3:3-7; 14:1-9; 1 Kgs 11:1-8; 2 Kgs 17:7-17).

Ezra’s solution is not prescriptive for believers today. In the new covenant under Christ, the faith of a believer sanctifies his or her marriage and children, so marriage to an unbeliever does not threaten the identity or purity of God’s people (1 Cor 7:14-16). The apostle Paul realized that divorce might occur when believers and unbelievers married, but he did not encourage believers in that situation to seek a divorce (1 Cor 7:10-13). Certainly, the wise policy to avoid these problems is to heed Paul’s advice not to marry an unbeliever in the first place. God’s people need to remain separated from what is unholy: “How can righteousness be a partner with wickedness? How can light live with darkness? What harmony can there be between Christ and the devil? How can a believer be a partner with an unbeliever?” (2 Cor 6:14-15). But those who are married to an unbeliever today have God’s assurance that he can use that difficult situation for his glory (see also 1 Pet 3:1-2).

Marriage and Sexuality

In Proverbs, the wise teacher frequently warns naive young men to avoid the temptations of sexual expression outside of marriage (2:16-22; 5:1-23; 6:20–7:27). While a young man might find other women physically attractive and seductive, the consequences of acting on these temptations are dire: His family and professional aspirations might be destroyed. Proverbs teaches young men to cultivate a strong relationship with their own wives. They are counseled to have healthy marital sex rather than sleeping with other women (5:15-20). Although Proverbs was originally written to instruct young men, women readers can think in the same categories and consider the same important issues.

From the beginning of Scripture, marriage is sacred, and appropriate sexual expression is an important part of marriage (Gen 2:23-25). The Fall created a rupture in all relationships, first between God and humans, and then between husband and wife (Gen 3). The division between Adam and Eve was expressed in terms of their sexuality; they could no longer stand naked in the garden without feeling shame. Proverbs urges young men and women to reclaim the beauty of marital love and guard its sanctity as God, the wise Creator, intended it.

Purity and Identity

One of Ezra’s main purposes in writing was to remind the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem of their need to remain pure in their beliefs and commitments. When Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, he found that the people had intermarried with pagan foreigners, even though doing so was not permitted in God’s law (see Deut 7:3-4; Josh 23:12-13). As a result, their identity as God’s holy nation was in danger of disintegrating (9:1-2).

In order to impress on his readers the need for separation from these foreigners, Ezra recounts how those who first returned to Jerusalem refused to cooperate with the pagan people
living around them (4:1-5). These people claimed to worship the same God, but they actually worshiped several gods in addition to Israel’s God. If the Jews had joined with these people, they soon would have compromised their beliefs and become ungodly, just as Israel had done before the Exile (see Exod 34:15-16; 1 Kgs 11:1-5; 2 Kgs 16:3). The leaders of Israel understood the danger of accommodating these foreigners. They learned from their ancestors’ experience and refused to compromise the purity of their faith for the sake of peace. They carefully followed God’s instructions in everything they did (3:2, 9; 6:18). If they were going to identify themselves as “the servants of the God of heaven and earth” (5:11), they would need to please and serve him and no other gods.

God is holy, and he made the covenant with Israel to establish a holy nation (Exod 19:4-6; Lev 19:2). Israel’s identity as God’s people required purity in worship and in social relationships (10:1-11). Similarly, believers today are identified as God’s holy people (1 Pet 2:9), a title that speaks of theological purity. Paul admonished the Corinthians to refrain from marrying unbelievers—for Christ and Satan have no fellowship. Righteousness and unrighteousness do not mix (2 Cor 6:14-15). The people of God must be separate by not touching unclean things and not marrying unbelievers (2 Cor 6:16-18)

**Belonging to Christ**

To many modern readers, the NT seems to portray an extreme view of the Christian life. Believers are called to forfeit their rights, suffer, and even die for the sake of Christ (Mark 8:34-36). They are to turn away from the things of the world that everybody else lives for (1 Jn 2:15-17) and even to despise their life in this world (John 12:24-25). So also Paul encourages them to give up the normal desires for marriage and family and remain single for Christ, if they have that spiritual gift (7:7).

What lies behind such an apparently extreme view of life? For Paul, it is the awareness that believers are claimed by Christ and so belong to him, body and soul. When Christ died, he bought them for himself (6:20). They must no longer live simply for themselves and their own desires (2 Cor 5:14-15). Having died to their own personal interests, they are called to live entirely for their Lord (Rom 14:7-9).

For true Christians, obedience to Christ is not an onerous burden, but a way to express their love and loyalty to the one who died for them (Mark 12:30). For the people of Christ, the whole of life is to be a joyful expression of thanks for the grace God has shown them in Jesus Christ. They gladly yield their lives to serve the one who gave up everything for them. By dying to themselves, they make it possible for him to live in and through them (Gal 2:19-20).